



The Pen Name

A Quarterly Newspaper

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An Interview with Jess Henderson

Author of “OFFLINE MATTERS: The Less-Digital Guide to Creative Work”
intro & questions by James T. Padlow

Jess Henderson is a writer, researcher, theorist, and regular contributor to The Pen Name Newspaper. At current, Henderson runs **NO FUN MAG**, an online zine dedicated to asking unasked questions about life in the digital age. But from 2017 to 2020, Henderson ran a weekly newsletter called **Outsider**. In Henderson’s words, “Outsider was a transdisciplinary adventure through the trials and tribulations of life in the creative industries.” In my words, Outsider was a thought-provoking dojo where one could hone the ability to reject the evil bits of the nightmare that is the 21st century on planet Earth.

Outsider culminated in the publishing of Henderson’s book, *OFFLINE MATTERS: The Less-Digital Guide to Creative Work* – A provocative manual to help the creative-minded populace re-think what is necessary for the betterment of one’s life and art in modern times. It is truly a wonderful work of words... In fact, I enjoyed it so much I decided to pick the author’s brain further so our fair readers can better understand its teachings.

For the past several years, you and I have communicated through physical correspondence or email. We’ve never met in real life, nor have we spoken an audible word to one another, yet I feel a powerful kinship to you and your ideas. It’s always been a great comfort knowing that somewhere on the other side of the pond is some outsider preaching the good word of offline matters (see what I did there). However, I must also admit that without online forms of communication, you and I would most likely never have met... So my first question is this: How do we balance the obvious pitfalls of the digital age with its just as obvious benefits? Can it get better? Because from where I’m sitting, it appears to be getting worse.

I completely agree Jim, on both our awesome kinship and the feeling that things are getting worse. Many of my mentors and peers say that the best thing that could happen is that the ‘social media problem’ goes away as these things become sublimated into our lives, and thus enter us into a new phase. I find this difficult to imagine. The visceral friction and discomfort of the way these platforms and interactions are intervening in our lives seems to say otherwise. We remain in this love/hate entanglement that seems more paralytic than it does provisional of alternatives and new possibilities.

We have to be clear; having disdain towards social platforms and feeling disappointed towards how the online environment has developed does not mean we hate the internet altogether. So many wonderful things come out of these tools (like our meeting, for one) and much enjoyment, collaboration, and positive generation can come out of the access and provisions of the digital world. Just because I wrote a book called *Offline Matters* doesn’t mean I hate the internet. It’s simply that we inherently feel that the great things should be able to live in harmony with our offline lives and pursuits, which at present they arguably do not. It doesn’t feel to be a healthy balance. I don’t have the answers on how to ‘fix the internet,’ though what you’re asking provides a starting point: how to embrace and utilise the good whilst overcoming the pitfalls? Sometimes I feel that simply ignoring and ‘opting out’ of the pitfalls can be done – while on the other hand, I acknowledge that is indeed too simple of an expectation or suggestion.

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How can we as a species combat social media and smart-phone addiction when the modern world insists we take part in the spectacle if we want to succeed?

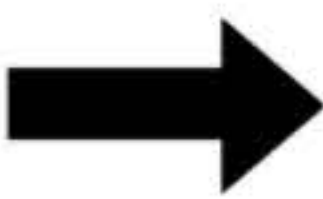
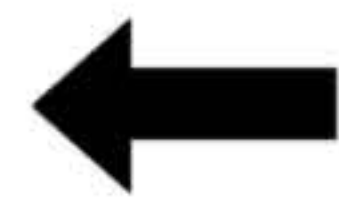
You cut to the crux of the issue. My practices, from writing under pseudonym to not using social media, is an ongoing experiment to undermine this ‘insistence’ that you speak of. These are deeply personal choices, made because they feel right to me and are the only way I can wake up in the morning and get done what I want to. However, they are not a prescription for everyone nor are they by any means easy.

A lot of the time I know that I am making more work for myself this way, but it is the only way that feels real and right to me. I enjoy the additional creative thinking and experimentation required (and like any experiment, sometimes it fails and other times it works). Ultimately it kind of depends on your belief in the spectacle and willingness to participate it in. Since that doesn’t interest me, it is easy to attempt doing things differently. I find it much more fulfilling, even through the failures. I feel good knowing that each day I am doing things in my way because I want to, not because I have to. That’s a good measuring stick I’ve found; am I doing this because I feel I have to, or because I want to? Your way of doing has to align with your aims and you have to be prepared to make sacrifices in staying true to what you believe in and how you want to live your life. This isn’t some kind of self-help sludge; it’s just about recognition. If you don’t care about fame and fortune, acting outside of the popular way of doing is easier. Plus, the whole social media game rarely provides these things it promises anyhow – so that road is laced with disappointment. That’s another important point to prevent one from becoming disillusioned and demotivated.

You question current methods for measuring what’s valuable. I agree this is of the utmost importance, but how can a creative company or individual thrive in a capitalist world without keeping an eye toward financial growth?

Financial growth as a mandate requires questioning from the get-go. What’s wrong with staying small or mid-sized if it’s providing sustainability, joy, and a sensible level of comfort? I’d rather be smaller and freer, even if it means having a low-cost life without...

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(CONTIUED FROM PAGE 4) extra luxuries. This is again totally personal and about your own end goal. I work hard to cover basic needs and prioritise a state of maximum autonomy – which in turn allows me to create my own paradigm that values collaboration, play, and fun over aiming for maximum growth. I don’t need to grow bigger. I’d rather aim for creating the space for others to live a creative life (in other words, one that facilitates their vocation) where we can all decide what’s valuable, instead of feeling pressured by (what is essentially propaganda) to capitalise on every moment and idea as much as possible – no matter the cost (physically, mentally, emotionally, in terms of personal relations, time taken away from hanging out, being with people you care about, etc.)

The perceived right to make a living from ‘what you love’ is a fallacy. There is nothing wrong with having hobbies that fulfill you and not having to entrepreneur them into a livelihood. Hobbies are a precious thing undervalued in our society today. As is hanging out with your friends doing nothing!

“Move on from millennial” is a statement in your book which struck a chord with me. Can you summarize the intention behind this phrase?

Isn’t it such a boring word? The ‘millennial’ is a fantasy demographic profile dreamed up by marketers that has now bled into the everyday vernacular. It doesn’t take much to reveal it as a broad description characterising the majority of the white middle-class today (also irrespective of age.) It’s hard to condense that whole chapter you’re referring to here but essentially these stereotypes are inadequate and dangerous. We should be wary of marketing-speak wanting to simplify a complexity and multiplicity of people, and consequently creating a sort of ‘generation war’ between older and younger people.

Influencers... Yay or nay?
Jim, are you going to make me say it? C’mon. Who would say yay!
Let’s say yay for the entertainment factor and observation of a social phenomenon. And otherwise...

Can we change the system from the outside or must we know it front and back before we can change it for the better? Asking for a friend.
Both are viable strategies. Outsiders don’t know the rules, so easier to break them. Insiders can use their knowledge and access to circumvent and flip the switch.

Do you think there will ever be a time where human beings reject technology en masse?
Many are speculating this. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see! I suspect that if it were to happen it will be a reaction to surveillance, particularly post-pandemic.

Any last words for the readers of The Pen Name?
This is such a special space. Supporting, encouraging, and defending such sanctuaries is crucial. Just as we must offer strength to our squats, independent initiatives, and comrades! The Pen Name has given me so much, all of it intangible. Never did I expect to find a gathering of like minds like this so far away. Call on me anytime.

I’m also looking for anyone willing to share their personal experiences of burnout (yes, I’ve had one too. At 22 years old! Ridiculous.) You can write to me at jess@nofun.tips. I’d love to hear from Pen Name readers on this and any matter or collaboration. Write and say hi!

And if you’re into no fun, meet me here: www.nofunmag.substack.com

ENTER TO WIN:

Would you like your very own copy of *OFFLINE MATTERS: The Less-Digital Guide to Creative Work*? Finish the sentence “Offline matters because...” and send your submission to thepennamela@gmail.com, with the subject line OFFLINE MATTERS. The Top three answers selected by the editors of The Pen Name will receive a free copy of the book. Enter by 5-1-21.

Pining for the End

by @drawn_poorly

Readiness for the zombie apocalypse is something that comes up in conversation. That mindless brain-eatingsub-humans will roam the earth. People wandering into oncoming traffic while staring at their dumbphones is a close second. As entertainment, we now see things in the form of escape rooms, axe-throwing rooms, rooms where you just get to smash things. What are you escaping from? Then we have all the super clean trucks and jeeps adorned with racks, water, and gas cans, and the ubiquitous pick and shovel, always unused. Because you may not know, digging a hole is hard work but looking like you’re ready to dig a hole, that is easy. All this “readiness” I find absurd. What are you getting ready for? All the doomsday-preppers with their guns and generators, stocks of food and water, etc. If history is any guide, well-armed criminal gangs are the first to take over when the fabric of society is torn. Anyone that tries to hold on to a moral code, the phony Hollywood lone warrior and other fictitious archetypes that contradict human nature will be slaughtered. Readiness to organize will not be in your hand when the other shoe drops, you will just be a steward for all of this “survival” gear that the aforementioned gang will kill you to take. When things get easy, as they have been for some time, we forget what it means to truly struggle. We pine for more rugged times. Before the First World War, people romanticized war. They wrote poems to it, generals planned and plotted to its inevitable commencement. All that was needed was an excuse. Once a pretext was found the poets of war died for it. Even then in the opening months,

war was romanticized to such extreme ends that in the French army it was thought to be chic to die while wearing white gloves. Ideas when put up against reality shed a blinding light upon how absurd the human mind is vs. human nature. It is easy to show others you’re ready for the collapse of society, but when you have no cell phone service you will run around like a chicken with its head cut off. Looking forward to the end, whatever that may be just looks like a bunch of phony internet posturing. Once it actually came, 7-11 would be closed, so would Starbucks, and you could not have central air and be able to update your Fakebook page any longer. The phony monument to yourself would be revealed to be made of clapboard and sticky-tack, not made of stone. The erroneous self-image you have clung to so tightly would crumble; the truth of who you really are would be your first death before your corporeal form perished. Again, I feel like people now see no opportunity in the future, that what lies ahead holds no promise. We want to hit the reset button so we can have an opportunity to advance because now, we are tethered to our place in the world with invisible chains. Such wasted energy could be put towards a better future. Under the structure of our safe society, if you find yourself struggling to do mundane things like paying your bills on time, do you really think one would have the wherewithal to survive where things like clean drinking water would be a challenge? I gather these ideas that permeate our culture are the unspoken truth that consumer culture leads to a life unfulfilled. Rich people that come into this life with little or no friction destroy themselves with drugs and suicide at much higher rates than those of us lucky enough to have worked hard for what we have in this world. People say the struggle is real, it is; struggle makes one real. Struggle is in the core of our being. Without it, we go through the river of life with our oar not in the water. To row your own boat, good or bad, is a gift. Don’t squander what you’ve been given.

